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**Article**

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POINT OF VIEW

Open Access



# Gaps in the structuring of organizations in the graduate employment context in Uganda

Peter Dithan Ntale<sup>1\*</sup> , Jude Ssempebwa<sup>2</sup>, Badiru Musisi<sup>2</sup>, Genza Gyaviira Musoke<sup>2</sup>, Kimoga Joseph<sup>3</sup>, C. B. Mugimu<sup>3</sup>, Ngoma Muhammed<sup>1</sup> and Joseph Ntayi<sup>1</sup>

\* Correspondence: [pntale@mubs.ac.ug](mailto:pntale@mubs.ac.ug)

<sup>1</sup>Makerere University Business School, Faculty of Graduate Studies & Research, Plot 21A, Port bell Road, Nakawa, P.O Box 1337, Kampala, Uganda

Full list of author information is available at the end of the article

## Abstract

The complexity of global challenges requires that organizations collaborate with one another. To do this, stakeholders need flexible structures that are designed in a way that allows organizations to collaborate. However, it is not known whether Uganda's organizations are structured in a way that allows them to collaborate with one another, casting doubt as to whether they can manage the complexity of global challenges such as graduate unemployment. Informed by Hage and Aiken (1967), we studied the structures of selected organizations in Uganda and found out that their major components, i.e., centralization and formalization, are designed in a way that may not allow collaboration to occur. We found out that the organizational structures were exclusive in decision-making, had high power distance (HPD), jobs were strictly codified, and organizations enforced stringent rule observation. These gaps make it difficult for people interaction and involvement and deny them of their freedom to relate with one another, making it difficult for a collaboration between different agencies to occur. To enhance organizational collaboration, it is recommended that organizations should be restructured to become more inclusive, interactive, and democratic since organizations structured in this way have shown collaboration success and greater achievement of society needs.

**Keywords:** Inter-agency collaboration, Graduate employment, Organizational structures, Uganda

## Introduction

Working in collaboration has become common for organizations throughout the world. The political, economic, social, environmental, and technological needs of the twenty-first century are complex that an individual organization may not have the capabilities to meet such complex demands. Therefore, organizations that consistently persist on pursuing individualistic mandates more often fail to adapt to emerging conditions which makes their survival in a competitive and volatile complex business environment quite difficult (Helgesson et al. 2018). They lack resources and synergy to not only contribute to their individual organizational mandates but also to the collective needs of society. According to Kraak (2011), organizations that work in silos are characterized by duplication of work, huge public expenditure, competition, and

conflict over organizational mandates while pursuing their individualistic mandate to which they do not fully achieve, worse still undoing each other's achievements.

According to Hage and Aiken (1967), the individualistic tendencies displayed by organizations in the execution of their mandates are normally a sign of organizations whose structures are centralized and formalized. Centralized organizational structures define the extent to which organizations are centralized. This looks at two major constructs: decision-making and hierarchy of authority. Formalization defines the extent to which organizations are formalized. This looks at two more constructs: job codification and rule observation. Despite the fact that scholars such as Ruekert et al. (1985) confirm that centralization and formalization lead to greater organizational effectiveness and efficiency; recent scholars such as Huxham and Vangen (2013), Nysten (2007), Ramus et al. (2017) indicate that centralization and formalization of organizations do poorly at bringing people/organizations to work together which fails them in their effort to achieve the complex organizational and societal needs of the twenty-first century.

### **Centralization**

The extent to which organizations are centralized is determined by the extent to which decision-making is done either centrally determined or inclusive to everyone. Organizations that centrally make a decision are less democratic, less inclusive, and more authoritative in the way their organizations are managed (Dryzek 1997). According to the Leadership Judgement Indicators (Faraci et al. 2013), organizations whose decision-making mechanism is authoritative have minimal chances of promoting interactions between different partners upon which collaboration may be developed. On the contrary, organizations that are decentralized and horizontally structured tend to bring people together and promote cross-functional interaction, which makes them inclusive in their decision-making, a strong hypothesis that promotes collaboration between different parties (Kim 2005).

Organizational centralization can also be seen from the way organizations are hierarchically structured. According to Hofstede et al. (2014), organizations that have power and authority concentrated at the top of the leadership have high power distance (HPD) and those with less power between leaders and subordinates have low power distance (LPD). Organizations with high power distance are less inclusive in terms of decision-making, have less interactions between different management layers, and have stringent rules and regulations that the lower employees need to observe. Organizations structured with high power distance normally provide little or no opportunity for exchange of ideas and relational building between different parties, a behavior that does not promote collaboration for any meaningful purpose such as the creation of graduate employment opportunities.

### **Formalization**

The extent to which organizations are formalized is manifested in the way jobs are described. Jobs that are strictly specified normally infringes on employees to associate, interact, and communicate with people at different hierarchical layers. Therefore, stringent job description falls short of relation building and interaction ingredients that bring people together which makes it difficult for employees to initiate any

collaborative efforts (Folgheraiter 2003). However, organizations that are not restrictive in job codification always give a chance to employees to communicate within and across organizations, which further enhances collaboration (Hsieh and Hsieh 2003).

Rule observation is another way through which organizational formalization is manifested. Formal organizations are characterized by strict rules and regulations that should be observed by different stakeholders. Such rules and regulations define the dos and don'ts of employees in an organization. For example, in some organizations, rules and regulations bar lower-level employees from interacting with employees at higher levels (Tierney et al. 1999). There is a clear communication channel from the top to down, and normally, there is a specific person from the top that does this kind of communication. This does not only infringe on the freedom of employees to interact with one another which strains any collaborative efforts between the intending partners but also restricts innovativeness and creativity that may come as a result of the cross-functional collaboration between different employees within or across the organizations (Lu et al. 2019). However, organizations that are flexible on rules and regulations always promote cross-functional interactions between different employees which promotes collaboration between different employees within and outside the organization (Ramadass et al. 2018).

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#### **Demonstration of centralization and formalization in the case of employment in the Oregon state, USA**

In a bid to create more jobs for the unemployed people in the Oregon state, the top management in the state Adult and Family Services (AFS) agency decided on an aggressive strategy of collaborating with 3 other large hierarchical and bureaucratic organizations. These organizations included the community colleges, the JOBS Council, and Employment Division. AFS top management further decided to devolve more power and responsibility to its district offices, numbering about 15 around the district and to line staff. By 1995, all the 18 different organizations with similar mandates but previously acting independent of each other had transformed into a single collaboration with a single objective of creating more employment opportunities for the youth in Oregon City. By collaborating, they broke down the centralized and formalized organizational structures of the 3 major organizations, preferring to collaborate more interactively with other organizations including the 15 district offices that were now part of the collaboration.

The major outcomes of this collaboration were cutting down the inefficiencies that came as a result of having multiple organizations doing a similar activity but achieving very little, minimization of competition and conflict over resources, power and authority, high-level involvement and interaction of all stakeholders across different organizational layers bringing in high levels of individual employee responsibility. State funding became bigger and permanent, even when the state legislature of cutting state agencies' budgets during the general fiscal crisis of 1995–2000 became real. There was cross-functional communication between the different organizational layers and finally reduced organizational rules and regulations making it easy employees' freedom to interact within and across the organizations. This collaboration turned the statewide system into a relatively high performing operation, creating a number of employment opportunities for unemployed people.

Source: Bardach (1998)

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The case highlights two major issues that hindered the creation of employment opportunities in Oregon prior to the decision of AFS to collaborate with other agencies. These issues stem from the way these organizations were structured. They are centralization and formalization of the 3 big employment organizations including the 15 district offices. According to Gray (1989), Huxham and Vangen (2013), and Thompson (2013), centralized and formalized organizations have the following characteristics which make it difficult for organizations to collaborate with one another. These characteristics are evident in the above case study. By being centralized, decision-making is done at the top of the leadership which excludes lower- and sometimes middle-level managers in decision-making, yet the day-to-day operations of the organization are hinged on their efforts. By excluding them from the decision-making mechanism, organizations risk having

demotivated employers whose trust, commitment, and interest in their organization are negligible (Bardach 1998). Therefore, organizations that are structured in this way may not give collaborative opportunities to their employees which provide less opportunities to achieve organizational goals. Due to the hierarchical nature of centralized organizations, there is always a high power distance between different layers of authority. The most top layers wield too much power, authority, and respect compared to lower employees. This makes it difficult for people interactions on a number of things that concern organizational development. Where high power distance exists, it is difficult to create collaborations between different agencies (Hofstede et al. 2014). When power distance between leaders and employees is minimal, there are greater cross-functional interactions which are a recipe for greater collaborations. In fact, according to the power distance index by Hofstede et al. (2014), some developing countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, and the UK rank highly in terms of low power distance. These are countries that have shown greater collaborations between different agencies while most Asian countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore have a high power index and indeed little or no greater collaboration success stories are known in those countries.

Formalization of the 3 organizations and the 15 district offices was seen in terms of job codification and rule observation. The jobs in all these organizations were described in a way that allowed employees to concentrate on their work and mindful of the different organizational layers. The job description restricted communication within and outside the organization and only preserved this privilege to the top management (Ntale et al. 2019). There were rules and regulations to enforce discipline in all the 3 organizations. Therefore, employees were kept mindful of the rules and regulations. These deterred them from collaborating with one another within and across the organization for fear of consequences that may arise out of this (Daugherty et al. 2006).

AFS took a decision to collaborate with other organizations in the same industry after realizing the dangers of running fragmented organizational operations vis-à-vis the benefits that accrue to them when they work together. After collaborating, they were able to attract enough funding from the state even when there was legislation to cut down the agencies' budgets due to the economic downtime of 1995 to 1998. There were interactions within and across organizational boundaries with necessitated collaboration between different agencies. Employee's freedom to participate in organizational decision-making was realized making it easier for the collaboration between agencies possible.

It would seem from this case and several other cases such as the fight against drug trafficking (Ledebur and Youngers 2013), healthcare (Chuang and Wells 2010), road network (Bryson et al. 2015), and creation of employment opportunities (McQuaid 2010) that organizational collaboration is driven by a desire that far goes beyond their individualistic agenda and capacity to achieve. This is demonstrated in several other success stories such as in the UK (Audretsch and Belitski 2019), Australia (Butcher et al. 2019), and Canada (Bullock et al. 2018) that the more developed countries are driven by a desire to deliver collective needs of society such as the creation of employment opportunities. This drives them to look for innovative solutions through which solutions to such problems can be solved. According to Hood et al. (1993), the collaboration of organizations is one of the creative and innovative solutions that can

easily solve collective problems which individual organizations may not afford. This is attributed to the early development of democratic and inclusive governance in the national and local management of political, economic, and social affairs which ushered in a culture of accountability to all the involved stakeholders. It is this culture of accountability that normally makes organizations think about their deliverables as demanded by the society which makes them collaborate with one another to achieve societal needs. The culture of accountability and inclusive governance advocates for inclusive decision-making, freedom of actors to participate freely in all organizational activities, reduced power distance between employees, and maximum interaction between different stakeholders at different organizational levels (Knoke 2019; Künzel 2012; Woods 2004). Organizations that are structured in such ways more often collaborate with one another so as to deliver common objectives.

In the less developed countries, however, observable practice shows limited collaboration among organizations, yet there are many challenges that would have been solved if organizations collaborated (Chiu et al. 2016). Challenges such as high unemployment levels, high illiteracy levels, poor governance, insufficient resources, poor health services, lack of adequate infrastructure, and poor governance cannot be solved by individual organizations since they lack adequate resources and synergy to solve such problems, yet there seem to be individualistic tendencies among the organizations in the developing countries. The literature on the issue of why organizations shun collaboration remains elusive as there are no sufficient studies done to elicit this debate. It is, therefore, the goal of this study to write about the structure of organizations, particularly the centralization and formalization of an organization, as the first step in identifying gaps that disallow collaboration between different agencies in a developing country context like Uganda.

### **The problem**

Organizations that promote the creation of graduate employment opportunities through their different mandates have tried a number of activities aimed at creating employment opportunities in the country. For example, the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal, Industry and Fisheries has provided several incentives (e.g., tax exemptions, free inputs like seeds and extension services) to support graduates to take up employment opportunities in the agricultural sector. For example, 99 billion shillings has been allocated to the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) to provide more agriculture extension services to different youth groups. The Ministry of Labor, Gender and Social Development implemented a 10 billion Youth Livelihoods Program under whose auspices the youths, including graduates, are given start-up capital to take up projects where they might work and provide opportunities to other people (State of the Youth Report, 2016/2017). Microfinance institutions and civil society organizations are also providing credit facilities that are tailored to the needs of youth borrowers (e.g., village savings and loan associations, group lending) with the view to spur their entrepreneurship potential and thereby gain employment while creating opportunities for others. With the support of multinational organizations like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), non-governmental organizations and private sector

organizations like Enterprise Uganda, The New Vision Publishing Company, The Uganda Private Sector Foundation, and Standard Chartered Bank Uganda Limited are also providing various forms of support towards youth entrepreneurship development (United Nations Development Program report 2015). Several government and private sector organizations like Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA), Meera Investments, and UAP Properties have also built expansive social infrastructure in the form of commercial buildings, stores, and markets to support the creation of employment opportunities for youths. With funding from the African Development Bank, for instance, KCCA invested USD 5 million into low-cost markets in which youths in various parts of the city could trade (African Development Bank Report 2017).

Unfortunately, despite the activities of these organizations, the graduate unemployment problem is still persistent, raising concern over the structure of organizations that deal with the creation of employment opportunities. Scholars such as Huxham and Vangen (2013) confirm that organizations that are structured in ways that promote individualistic agenda may lack resources to execute large-scale programs through which many youth graduates may be employed. This is besides the wastage of available resources through duplication of work, competition, and conflicts over operational and strategic mandates (Cashore et al. 2019). This is the characteristic of Uganda's organizational structures, a cogent hypothesis that their centrally and formally hierarchical formations may hinder organizational collaboration and ultimately affect any opportunity towards the creation of employment opportunities.

#### **The proposed solution to the problem**

We propose an organizational structure that allows people interaction, inclusive decision-making, low on power distance, and less on organizational rules and regulations. A shared/collaborative governance structure responds well to traditional hierarchical bureaucracies whose exclusive decision-making, high power distance, and stringent rules and regulations make it difficult for people and organizations to freely interact and develop effective and beneficial collaborations (Agranoff 2012). Therefore, collaborative governance brings public and private stakeholders together in collective forums with public agencies to engage in consensus-oriented decision-making aimed at solving collective needs (Vangen et al. 2015). This is enabled through decentralized and horizontal structures which bring different stakeholders more closely and involve them in decision-making while allowing them the chance to communicate and interact cross-functionally.

Different scholars and practitioners in multiple disciplines have embraced the emerging structure of collaborative governance, for example, in political science (e.g., Ansell and Gash 2008; Dryzek 1996, 2012), public administration (e.g., Bingham et al. 2008; Emerson et al. 2012), public management (e.g., Agranoff and McGuire 2003), planning (e.g., Forester 1999; Innes and Booher 2003; Margerum 2011), conflict resolution (e.g., Costantino and Merchant 1996; Susskind et al. 1999), and environmental studies (e.g., Koontz and Thomas 2006; Scholz and Stiffler 2005; Susskind et al. 2010). These scholars and many others agree that there are many benefits that organizations achieve when they adopt collaborative governance

structures. Such benefits may include greater collaboration between different organizations, improved coordination of activities, better leveraging and pooling of resources, increased social capital, enhanced conflict management (prevention, reduction, and resolution), better knowledge management (including generation, translation, and diffusion), increased risk-sharing in policy experimentation, and increased policy compliance (Agranoff 2008; Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Leach and Sabatier 2005; Milward and Provan 1995). However, as indicated in different literature, scholarship on collaborative governance seems to be well developed among developing countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, and the UK. According to Hofstede et al. (2014), these countries are democratic, inclusive, and have low power distance between leaders and subordinates which makes them work as a collective than individuals in the achievement of greater collective needs than individualistic agenda. However, scholarship on collaborative governance is not well developed in most of the developing countries such as Uganda. This makes it difficult to assess the extent to which democratic governance may allow collaboration between different agencies and the extent to which collective needs such as the creation of graduate employment opportunities may be created.

Therefore, the question to ask is whether organizations responsible for the creation of graduate employment opportunities in Uganda are ready to collaborate amidst the prevalence of centralized and formalized organizational structures. According to the reviewed literature, the answer to this question is that collaboration in a centralized and formalized organization structure happens to a lower extent due to the non-interactive, non-inclusive, and non-democratic nature of such organizational structures. In response to this, an interactive and inclusive organizational structure is proposed to deal with the gaps that come along with the centralized and formalized organizational structures if organizations are to benefit from organizational collaborations particularly the creation of graduate employment opportunities in developing countries.

### **Discussions and recommendations**

The top-bottom decision-making/tell decision-making approach is not amenable to inter-agency collaboration. It is therefore recommended that organizations responsible for graduate employment should be restructured to allow employees with freedom to participate in organizational decision-making. The employee motivation that comes along with this employee involvement is likely to change the dynamics of public and private organizations' performance from autonomous actions to interactive dynamism which according to Western (2019) is associated with organizational creativity, innovativeness, agility, and concern for societal needs than individual needs. Reducing hierarchical organizational structures and introducing flat and relational-based organizations require individuals who collaborate effectively.

High power distance organizations are associated with autocracy, negative organizational progress, less employee involvement, low employee motivation and empowerment, and poor organizational health (Khatri et al. 2009). According to Hofstede et al.'s (2014) model, high power distance organizations' employees cultivate a culture of not participating in decisions and the general preference to leave decision-making and all organizational matters to their superiors to decide on what to do. The employers also prefer it that way and take it upon themselves to take advantage of this



to wield powers, command respect, and decide on organizational matters the way they want. Employees are normally instructed on what their actions should be of which they are mandated to follow passively. Communication between different layers of organization is vertical downwards with no or little horizontal communication. This explicitly widens the gap between superiors and their subordinates since it makes it hard for the lower echelon employees to express their views to the upper echelons. According to Cockburn et al. (2019), organizations that are vertically organized in layers of varying power and influence offer no or little opportunity for collaboration for institutional collaboration. With little or no collaboration opportunities for organizations that are hierarchically structured, we recommend that organizations should be restructured in a way that reduces the power distance and establishes more relational approaches between employers and employees. Leaner networked organizations based on interaction and networks should be adopted to shorten the power distance by allowing more cross-functional interactions which will develop trust and mutuality hence collaboration.

Stringent job codification deters employees not only from performing their tasks effectively but also from relating with each other (Organ et al. 2006). This is in line with Bryson (2018) who found out that if individuals cannot relate well due to the way their jobs are specified, they cannot perform internal organizational matters and thus cannot collaborate across organizations. Hoyet et al. (2012) reported a significant relationship between employees' freedom at work and collaboration. Their study resulted from 2500 school teachers in the USA in which teachers expressed resentment for the way their jobs were described. The jobs were described in a way that limited their internal and external association with other key stakeholders, which promoted worker's alienation and thus disallowing professional collaboration. We recommend that institutions in Uganda should codify employee responsibilities in a way that allows them to interact and work with each other within and across organizations. As put by Aktouf (1992), modern organizations should replace the traditional unitary work paradigms that are restrictive to employees' freedom to pluralistic, humanistic, caring, and interactive work paradigms if they are to sail through the competitive challenges of modern society.

Finally, we recommend that the current organizational structures be restructured from hierarchical and centralized organizations to collaborative governance structures. Collaborative governance deals with removing hierarchies, empowering employees to become more involved in organizational matters, and breaking down the stringent rules and regulations while allowing interaction within and outside the organization. This brings people closer and interactive hence allowing them to become more collaborative in what they intend to achieve either as individual organizations or as collectives. This may require training and developing capacity in collaborative intelligence. Collaborative intelligence refers to the ability to build, contribute to, and manage power found in networks of people. This kind of training is necessary for all organizational employees regardless of the positions they hold. It equips employees with practical knowledge on relational communication, negotiations, and emotional intelligence in a collaborative environment. These will cut down hierarchical organizational structures and reduce power distance while making organizations more flat, relational, and inclusive, capable

of collective negotiations and collective decisions to achieve the desired organizational or societal outcome.

#### Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

#### Author details

<sup>1</sup>Makerere University Business School, Faculty of Graduate Studies & Research, Plot 21A, Port bell Road, Nakawa, P.O Box 1337, Kampala, Uganda. <sup>2</sup>East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, College of Education and External Studies, Room A3, Makerere University, P.O Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda. <sup>3</sup>East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development, College of Education and External Studies, Makerere University, P.O Box 7062, Kampala, Uganda.

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